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ABSTRACT

This paper shows how changing the learning situations in which psychology students find themselves can affect their motivation to write differently. When students have something to say to someone for some reason, they can learn both content and important lessons about writing. The paper describes a project that involved an introductory college psychology course in which the students wrote a booklet about psychology for a ninth-grade English class in a different city. The project involved five steps: (1) psychology students learn about experimental psychology; (2) grade 9 English students write letters of introduction to the psychology class; (3) psychology students compose first draft of the booklet; (4) English students edit and respond to first draft; and (5) psychology students revise booklet. The study found that because the writing of the students was resituated beyond the classroom, in their relationship with readers, their writing was motivated differently and in a positive manner. (DB)

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Situating Discourse in and Beyond the Psychology Classroom

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Situating Discourse in and Beyond the Psychology Classroom

My colleagues in English departments like to quote "KB," Kenneth Burke. Thus James Reither has drawn my attention to Burke's (1973) Philosophy of Literary Form, where he writes: "Critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose. They are not merely answers, they are strategic answers, stylized answers" (p. 1).

I'm not divulging a trade secret to say that teachers of psychology are often unhappy with the quality of student writing, which tends to be error-ridden and perfunctory. Yet from a Burkean perspective, student writing--as much as critical or imaginative writing--can be considered an answer to questions posed by the situation in which it occurs. The implication is that our students are not deficient but rather are writing strategically, in response to the evaluative and competitive situations they typically find themselves in.

Therefore, if we think student writing is "poor," we should be looking to the situations or scenes in which such writing arises. And if our classroom scenes are motivating the wrong kinds of writing, we must change the scenes. What Reither (1993) says about writing classrooms is just as true of psychology classrooms: "most classrooms are scenes that motivate the wrong kinds of writing and thus the wrong lessons about writing. . . . We must reorganize classrooms so that they will motivate writing differently" (p. 3).

In this paper I would like to illustrate how classroom scenes in psychology can be reorganized in order to motivate writing differently. My argument is that when people have something to say to someone for some reason, they can learn content and they can learn important lessons about writing. Elsewhere I have summarized this project for psychologist readers (Vipond, in press); here I will try to describe it more concretely by giving ample illustrative examples.

The scene is my introductory psychology class (1991-92), a two-semester (26-week) course with 30 students. My students wrote a booklet about psychology for a ninth-grade English class in a different city. (I am grateful to the teacher of the grade 9 class, Susan McDonald, who made this project possible.) For convenience the project can be described in five steps, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Steps of Project

(1) psychology students learn about experimental psychology
(2) English students write letters of introduction
(3) psychology students compose first draft of booklet
(4) English students edit and respond to first draft
(5) psychology students revise booklet

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

Step 1: Psychology Students Learn About Experimental Psychology

During the first semester (September-December), the psychology students studied scientific, experimental psychology. More specifically, they read about and wrote responses to the classic experiments described by Steven Schwartz (1986) in the first six chapters of Classic Studies in Psychology (Table 2).

Table 2

Classic Studies in Psychology Studied in Semester 1

Pavlov -- conditioned reflex
Watson -- Little Albert
Sperry -- split-brain research
Fechner -- psychophysics
Ebbinghaus -- memory
Bartlett -- constructive memory
Gibson -- perception
Schachter -- emotion

This provided an introduction to psychology as an experimental science. During the first semester my students also wrote collaborative papers on more specialized topics in experimental psychology. Working in groups of up to four, students did a set of projects on learning (Table 3) and memory (Table 4).

Table 3

Learning Topics Explored by Psychology Students in Group Projects

theories of reinforcement
role of punishment
biological constraints on learning
Skinner and the Skinner box
social learning theory
learned helplessness
classical conditioning in everyday life
therapeutic uses of classical conditioning
therapeutic uses of operant conditioning

Table 4

Memory Topics Explored by Psychology Students in Group Projects

sensory memory
short-term memory
long-term memory
episodic memory
metamemory
biology and biochemistry of memory
amnesia
memory and aging
improving memory: chunking
improving memory: mnemonics

As a result, by the end of the first semester the psychology students had some grounding in scientific psychology: (a) they thought of psychology as a science, (b) they thought of learning in terms of classical and operant conditioning, and (c) they thought of memory as something that could be studied either in the tradition of Ebbinghaus or Bartlett. Then the surprise came.

Step 2: English Students Write Letters of Introduction

Around Christmas, the grade 9 students wrote letters to the psychology class. The younger students were asked to introduce themselves and say what they thought about psychology, learning, and memory. An example of a complete letter, from "Kerry," is given in Table 5; Table 6 gives excerpts from the letters to indicate in more detail what the students said about psychology, learning, and memory.

Table 5

Letter from Kerry

Hi! How are you? I'm fine. My name is Kerry from Dalhousie, N.B. I go to D.R.H.S. I'm 14 years old and in grade 9. My birthday is March 29th, 1977. My favorite sports are downhill skiing and volleyball. I have blue eyes and blondish brown hair, shoulder length. My favorite subjects are English, Math and Gym.

I don't really know what a psychologist does but is it if someone needs help you help them sort out things. Learning new things is sometimes hard in a short time but I guess I am pretty good at learning. I am sort of good at memorizing things but if it is long I'm not the best at it. I think most people find it hard to memorize long things.

Yours truly, Kerry

Table 6

Excerpts from the Letters Written by Grade 9 Students

On psychology:

(1) "I'm not sure exactly what Psycology is, I think it's shrinks and little couches."

(2) "I don't really know a lot about psychology. What I think of is a person who helps crazy people or puts them in an institute. So tell me some about it in your book."

(3) "When I think about psychology I think about Ink-Blots and couches."

On learning:

(4) "As for learning I am pretty good in french, & english. But one thing that I am not good at learning is math."

(5) "I like learning but sometimes it's hard. In Social Studies we are learning about China but before that we were learning about Africa and that was very hard. China is eaisier to learn than Africa."

(6) "Learning is easy for me. I make top marks, but I think I could do better. My easiest subjects are Math and English. My worst subject is Gym, but that's because the teacher and I don't get along."

On memory:

(7) "I don't know much about memory because I don't like memorizing things."

(8) "Memory, well my memory is not too good. When I study for a test I get the test and my mind goes blank."

(9) "When it comes to memory I don't have one."

As can be seen, the younger readers thought of psychology as clinical practice (apparently confusing it with psychiatry); they thought of learning as strictly a school phenomenon; and they thought of memory as memorizing. (I might add that my students weren't smug about this: they recognized that these were the same perceptions they had had just a few months before, before beginning to study academic psychology.)

But the important point here is this: There was such a dramatic difference between the psychology students' understanding of psychology, learning, and memory, and the grade 9 students' understanding, that now the psychology

students had a clear motive for writing. To put it bluntly, they had to "straighten these poor kids out."

If "people learn to write when they have something to say to someone for some reason," my students were now positioned to learn to write, because all those elements were unmistakably in place.

Step 3: Psychology Students Draft Booklet

This process took approximately four weeks. The class generated possible topics in a brainstorming session; individuals volunteered to draft items. These were commented on by others; in some cases, a different person was responsible for producing a second draft. During this month the students often worked in small editing groups. There was a good deal of collaboration, workshopping, and pooling of two reports into new ones. At the end of this time (which was somewhat chaotic, or at least free-flowing), we had a draft booklet consisting of the items listed in Table 7.

Table 7

Topics in First Draft of Booklet

(1) *Learning*

Ivan Pavlov
John B. Watson
Little Albert
concept of reinforcement
learning and memory in everyday life

(2) *Memory*

Ebbinghaus
3 types of memory (episodic, semantic, procedural)
tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon
constructive memory (Bartlett)
hints for improving memory
eyewitness testimony

(3) *Miscellaneous*

visual illusions
emotions
split-brain research (Sperry)

(4) *Games and Puzzles*

wordfinds (2)
crossword
memory for prose test
poems and limericks (6)

As can be seen, the topics that the psychology students wrote about in the first draft were drawn from material they had studied during the first semester: Pavlov, Watson, Ebbinghaus, Bartlett, and so on. The "games and puzzles" were included because the grade 9 students had made it clear in their initial letters that they did not want to read a "boring textbook." However, Table 7 implies more structure than actually existed: Items were placed in first draft of the booklet in no particular order. I sent copies to the grade 9 students' teacher, Susan MacDonald, and she handled the in-class responding.

Step 4: English Students Respond to Booklet

The English students, for whom this was a chance to practice editing and reader response (MacDonald, 1993), wrote their immediate reactions and suggestions in the margins of the draft booklet (for example, "Wow! this is great!" or "What?" or "boring"). Each grade 9 student also made a more general response at the end, usually in the form of a letter (see Table 8 for an example).

Table 8

Sample Response to Booklet by a Grade 9 Student

Dear University students in Fredericton whom I am writing to:

I read your book (most of it) and I'm going to give you my opinion of it. Overall, I like your book. It was interesting in some parts and in others I'd be counting the seconds or minutes till it was done. If you want a grade, I'd give you a B+. Of course, all great works of literature need criticism and hard work. Your book was good, but kind of unorganized. It was also L--O--N--G. A bit too much detail. Well, that's all I can think of. Good Luck!

Your pen pal -- not

Generally, the English students, like this negative pen pal, found the booklet too long and disorganized; some found it overly technical in places. At the same time, though, they seemed to like what we were doing (they especially liked the poems, games, and puzzles), and therefore the psychology students felt affirmed overall.

Step 5: Psychology Students Revise Booklet

The psychology students worked for about two weeks on a final draft. The English students' complaint about organization was heeded: the final draft was organized in chapters labeled "Learning," "Memory," and "Potpourri". On the other hand, their complaint about length was not heeded: no items were dropped from the first to second draft. Specific editing suggestions were sometimes adopted, sometimes not. The final copy was laser printed, photocopied, coil bound, and distributed to students in both classes.

STUDENT RESPONSE

I surveyed my students to find out what they thought of all this. I was especially interested to know whether they felt they had learned anything about psychology and about writing and readers. Of the 26 students who completed the anonymous questionnaire, 22 (85%) said they had learned something about psychology by doing the project; 19 (73%) said they had

learned something about writing.

But what specifically did they learn? Sample comments on psychology, writing, and readers are shown in Table 9.

Table 9

Reactions of Psychology Students to Project

A. *About psychology*

(1) "Gave us a chance to see what we learned about psyc."

(2) "I liked that we were helping other kids learn and know about psych."

(3) "Made me feel like I really knew stuff, because I was teaching others about what I had learned."

(4) "It was as if we were taking the role of the professor in this case."

B. *About writing*

(5) "writing require[s] lots of drafting and peer criticism before it reaches the published stage."

(6) "Writing takes patience and hard work."

C. *About readers*

(7) "I learned to take my readers into account when I write. I never did that before."

(8) "if [readers] can't understand what we wrote we didn't do our job. They are very vital to any piece of writing."

(9) "you should write so people will understand you."

The psychology students may have felt they learned about psychology because they were put in the new social role of teacher and therefore considered the material from a different perspective. (As many of us know, there is nothing like teaching something to really learn it.) At the same time, the students learned important lessons about writing, including how much work is required to produce something of publishable quality. Finally, my students learned some simple, basic truths about the importance of readers in the writing-reading transaction. The person who said "You should write so people will understand you" is beginning to appreciate that the ultimate criterion of writing is the reader's understanding.

CONCLUSION

To me this project shows that students can learn content and they can learn about writing when their discourse is resituated so that they are writing to readers rather than for a teacher. The writing of my students was resituated beyond the classroom, in their relationship with readers. Consequently, their writing was motivated differently. I don't mean to suggest that being aware of readers is the only thing writers need to know. But students who have spent 12 or more years in school writing for teachers and grades have had little opportunity to write in situations in which they can strategically affect readers' knowing. Projects like this give students the chance to be real writers and--which is the same thing--real psychologists.

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